

FOX HOUND HUNTER FOCUS GROUP MEETING SUMMARY

DECEMBER 19, 2007, CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA

GROUP PROFILE

The Fox Hound Hunter focus group took place on December 19, 2007, in Charlottesville, VA, as part of a statewide effort to identify and evaluate issues of concern related to hound hunting in the state. Approximately twenty-three fox hound hunters were invited to attend the focus group meeting. Invitees were selected because they had previously contacted the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) and expressed an interest in participating, because they had some involvement in hound hunting issues in the past, or because they were leaders in the hound hunting community. Of those invited, seventeen individuals attended the focus group meeting. Eleven participants were men, six were women, and all were white.

All participants identified themselves as avid fox hound hunters. Fourteen participants hunt foxes primarily on horseback, while three primarily hunt without horses. Many have participated in this activity since childhood. A few participants also use hounds to hunt deer and rabbits, one participated in bow and black powder hunting, and another also participates in goose hunting. One participant identified himself as a fox pen hunter. Several participants were members of the Masters of Foxhounds Association, Virginia Foxhunters Association, and other sportsmen or houndsmen's groups; some participants held leadership positions in these organizations. Although the views expressed at this focus group meeting and reported in this summary only represent the participating individuals, it is informative to know the breadth of interests involved.

FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

The focus group lasted approximately two hours (7:00 – 9:00 PM). During that time, participants responded to a series of questions (indicated in bold below) posed by the facilitator; these questions are similar in purpose and general content to those being asked at all 16 focus group sessions. A summary of responses from meeting participants is provided below, including selected direct quotes that help illustrate particular themes or key points in that discussion.

How important is hound hunting for you compared to other types of hunting or recreation that you and your family take part in?

Participants described fox hound hunting as one of the most important recreational activities they engage in. Many participants had been participating in fox hound hunting throughout their lives and several participated in this type of hound hunting activity exclusively. Participants described fox hound hunting as a lifestyle, not just an activity.

“Fox hunting...being right up there close with hounds who are running, and you’re running right with them, there’s nothing like it.”

“It becomes a passion. It’s a lifestyle.”

“It became a way of life, just going to the pen.”

“I started fox hunting when I was 12 years old and I’m seventy now.”

What are the two or three most important aspects of hunting with hounds to you?

Participants indicated that fox hound hunting was important to them because of tradition, family heritage, and fellowship with other hunters. Participants indicated that they appreciated that fox hound hunting as a way to be out in and enjoy nature and as a way to engage youth in meaningful outdoor activities. Participants also indicated that working with the hounds is an important part of the experience.

“To me, it’s being able to see the hounds work. It’s fantastic. You just can’t really say how great it is. I just thoroughly enjoy watching the hounds.”

“Fox hunting is like a social fabric in some communities. It’s not only hunting, it’s also social. And they share things, and they do things after the hunt, and before the hunt. And they do things for the community and they do things for wildlife.”

“Fox hunting is very important to me. As everyone said, the tradition and being outdoors and the hunting aspect of it, the hound aspect of it. And it’s challenging. I think that’s part of it too.”

“The main thing is meeting people and seeing different people and looking at different hounds....it’s just a way of life.”

“It is like a fraternity like you’ve never seen in your life.”

“When the children were little I always took a whole pile of little kids along and got them started hunting. It’s just such a pleasure to see their smiles and their eyes when those hounds open and are in full cry....it teaches them a true appreciation for the countryside. There is no other way to link today’s youth to preservation of the countryside and appreciation of all wildlife than to be right out there experiencing this first hand.”

What do you believe to be the most important issues facing hunters who use hounds today?

Participants indicated that the most important issues facing hound hunters include loss of land and wildlife habitat to development, public perception of hunting, and the need for education, especially for youth, about hunting. Participants described the problem of public perception as being related to a poor image of hound hunters perpetuated by a few

unethical individuals. Participants expressed a desire to have the VDGIF and other hound hunters perpetuate a more positive image of hound hunting.

“Without question, I think the land issue is the biggest issue.”

“I think there is a changing attitude as well. There are so many people who have not been privileged to enjoy the country lifestyle. But they want to be in the country and they move out to the country for all those special reasons but they don’t understand what people in the country do. Weather its running their hounds, or hunting deer, or what have you. And so there is a clash and that’s inevitable. And I think the change in attitude makes it a challenge.”

“I think that educating the public on the impact that hunting with hounds has on habitat preservation, open space, and the preservation of the species is essential....Its about preserving the habitat on which they depend and enough open space that’s connected space for them to really survive and to thrive.”

“If we can’t do something to change children’s attitudes or at least teach them the truth in the early grades, early on, we’re losing them.”

“There is a very small percentage of scallywags that just choose to do things the wrong way and they’re giving all of us, every single one of us, a black eye.”

What do you think is the most appropriate way to deal with those issues?

Participants again stressed the need for education both within the fox hound hunting community and of the public in general about ethical behavior and the positive aspects of hound hunting, including the economic impact fox hound hunting makes to the local and state economy. Some participants also indicated that any decision making to address issues should remain with the experts, rather than with the legislature.

“I think one of the first things we need to do is education our own community and try and raise the bar within the organizations of fox hunters, mounted or otherwise and to become more effective at communicating accurate, timely information.”

“Talking to the public about the positive things that come out of hunting with hounds, like the economic impact of what our sport does for the state....You add horses and you’ve got employment of ferries, hay, tack, and you know, it’s huge. Cars, trucks, 4-wheelers, employment. People can dwell a bit on what the positive aspects of our sport that might help.”

“You don’t hear the positive. You don’t hear the unique stories and situations that are a part of the history, and it’s sad.”

“...experts, PhDs, and scientists who are familiar with nature and familiar with animals [need] to be making those decisions, not legislators.”

In the areas where you hunt, have you seen any changes over the last 10 years in availability of lands for hunting with hounds? If you have seen changes, were they related to changes in land ownership, changes in attitudes of land owners, a combination of the two, or other factors?

Focus group participants acknowledged that they have seen changes in landowner attitudes. Participants indicated that newer landowners who have moved into rural areas from the city are unaware of hound hunting traditions. Many felt that the best strategy for dealing with this change is to work to develop a relationship with the landowners in a position to give hunting access. Participants noted that for mounted fox hunters, developing relationships is particularly important because they are working with horses as well as dogs. Participants indicated the need for all hound hunters to be united and connected to prevent being maligned as a group by the actions of a few offenders and the need to increase awareness about the need for open space.

“It’s good manners. Talking to people, and showing good manners...If you treat someone rudely, you’re going to get treated the way you deserve. And if you treat people with respect, that’s what we do and we get property opened up to us.”

“You are asking to come on their property, not only with your hounds to chase the fox, but with this group of horses. So, you know we have to be very careful, very considerate. Any time a hunt goes on someone’s land, these fixtures are set way in advance. Permission is always secured and then a courtesy call usually follows up. The landowners get notification monthly where the hunt will be, what they’re doing.”

“But, once again, a bad experience to people who are new to the country life can ruin it for everyone...that landowner is going to be very unhappy because he is associating that with all hound activities because they don’t know. They don’t know one group from another. All they know is: they’re hounds. And that’s the sort of thing that can get us all in trouble.”

“We can’t draw the line between fox hunters and deer hunters because when you get divided, you get conquered....For us to survive, everyone’s got to survive with their hounds.”

“At the same time if there is one segment of hound hunters that are repeatedly creating a problem with landowners then I think acknowledging that and, with the Department’s help, addressing solutions for that segment in a constructive manner is in all of our best interests.”

“If we perhaps can help them with better landowner management skills, some guidelines, or with some education, some role modeling. Perhaps we can raise that bar and protect open space for all of us.”

“Its multiplying every year more people are moving out. We need to educate them or something.”

Are there certain areas where you think that hunting with hounds is inappropriate? Do you have any guidelines you follow that determine where you will release your hounds?

Participants generally felt like this was a loaded question and declined, in general, to answer it. One participant recounted that in England, the organizing body encouraged hunts themselves to self regulate. Participants acknowledged that they are a high profile sport and need to self-regulate.

“There is a point as far as looking at what you are doing but the people who should be looking at what they’re doing isn’t necessarily the government. It should be ourselves.”

Have you or your hunting partners experienced any conflicts with landowners, other hunters or anyone else in relation to your hunting with hounds? What was the nature of the conflict? Was it resolved? How?

Participants did not recount any conflicts with landowners. Rather, participants reiterated the need for developing positive relationships with landowners and the need to educate landowners about hound hunting traditions.

We have tracking collars on all our hounds that we run on the outside with....you’ve got the right to retrieve, but if you go up to a place where you don’t know the landowner, its probably best to ride by the house....you need to let them know you’re going to be there.”

“I think a lot of it again is back to education. They get very upset. I’d get upset if I didn’t know anything about it.”

Some hunting groups (e.g., bow hunters) have developed education and ethics programs that amount to a set of “best practices.” Do you think that is something that other hunters, including those who use hounds, should do?

Participants indicated that a code of ethics is a very positive component of mounted fox hound hunting. Participants indicated that the mounted fox hunter code of hunting practices has helped landowner relationships, interactions with the media, and educating new hunters. Mounted fox hunters in the group also noted that their code of ethics came from within (as opposed to the government). Some participants also noted that many mounted fox hunts put on camps and clinics to introduce people to the sport of fox hunting which help to educate newcomers to the sport on proper conduct in the field.

“It’s the best thing we ever did. When I get media requests...we have a standard and we enforce the standard.”

“It’s very reassuring to the landowners and they know that if we’re part of the national organization that we have insurance and so the liability aspect of it is less daunting and that the national organization does kennel inspections and there is a certain standard there. And that we have rules concerning where people can hunt so that they don’t have to worry about five different packs of hounds coming across their particular property.”

“It also takes the that new hunter or somebody who really doesn’t understand the issues and if you’ve been able to identify the things that are most important that could hurt your sport the most...and make sure that all those new people know about it...if you’ve given them some direction...it can make a world of difference.”

“Probably the mounted fox hunting stretches more than any other kind. Most of the other hunting that take game, the firearms hunting, they all look to the Department to set the tone and set their limits and they look to their family and their friends and their fathers and their uncles that introduced them to it and that’s where they learned their code of ethics and that’s not always as consistent as a code that has been established for 100 years.”

“Everybody is taking the initiative to draw new people in—adults and children—and spend the day with them, educating them about the proper behavior or acceptable behavior in the hunt field.”

Mounted fox hunters spent some time discussing how the Mounted Fox Hunters Association works to foster two-way communication between individual hunts, landowners, and individual members and the Association’s leadership. Participants indicated that this system, developed by the mounted fox hunters themselves, serves to police their own ranks.

“If there is a problem and somebody knows about it they call up and say [so]....If there’s any allegation, either a director goes and checks it out or somebody goes and checks it out and makes sure that we get back to that person and try to satisfy them and answer their questions.”

“If we don’t follow the standards they set and the rules they set then they can yank our accreditation and so there’s a penalty and we are very aware of that. We police ourselves.”

Are there any other important questions that this group should discuss?

Participants discussed the need to work on conservation of open space to protect opportunities for everyone to hunt on. Participants asked for information about where hound hunters are located so that open space protection can be targeted to areas where hound hunting access is needed. Participants also noted that knowledge of where hound hunting and associated issues occur is important.

“To work on conservation of open space in order to fight sprawl and hopefully to develop landowners...it changes the attitude towards the land.”

“And going along with that, when was the last study done to find out where most of the hound hunters are? We should know that...and those are the kind of areas where we should do conservation and preservation.”

“We’ve got to know where the problems lie... You’re focused on a complaint that hunting with hounds can be a problem in some areas. Well, where are we talking about?”

Participants also asked how members of the Stakeholder Advisory Committee (SAC) will be selected. Virginia Tech facilitators indicated that SAC members must support the goal of the project. Participants also asked about whether animal rights and animal welfare groups would be participating in the process. Virginia Tech facilitators explained that some people with animal rights and animal welfare interests had participated in a focus group meeting, but reiterated that only those who can support the goal of the Hunting with Hounds project (i.e., to preserve the tradition of hound hunting) would be asked to participate on the SAC. Virginia Tech facilitators were also asked to describe the rest of the public input process, which, they explained, included the SAC, an informal survey, and open, public meetings. Virginia Tech facilitators also explained how information about the project is being disseminated through press releases, the internet, mailing lists, etc.

SUMMARY

The fox hound hunter focus group meeting was attended by both mounted and non-mounted fox hunters. All participants in this focus group meeting were extremely passionate about the sport of hound hunting. Most were life-long fox hound hunters and many held leadership positions in local and national fox hound hunting organizations. Participants indicated that hound hunting was important to them because of the sport’s tradition, opportunities for social interaction, ability to connect with youth hunters, and a love for the dogs. Participants indicated that changing attitudes of landowners and lack of awareness in general about hound hunting is an issue; however, participants stressed that proper conduct in the field, courtesy, and strong self-policing can and do prevent or alleviate situations they encounter. Participants also stressed the need to develop relationships with landowners and educate them about the positive tradition of hound hunting to help preserve open space, wildlife populations, and hunting opportunities for all.